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# Tibetan Buddhism and Mass Monasticism

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## Introduction

Monasticism is fundamental to both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist philosophies and is present wherever Buddhism existed. Tibet was no exception and possessed a monastic establishment that adhered to the basic Buddhist ideological and vinaya norms. At the same time, however, Tibetan monasticism differed markedly from other forms of Buddhist monasticism in its utilization of a philosophy that I have called “mass monasticism”—an emphasis on recruiting and sustaining very large numbers of celibate monks for their entire lives.<sup>2</sup> This essay will examine Tibetan monasticism and the institution of mass monasticism as it existed in the modern era (before socialist institutions replaced them in 1959).<sup>3</sup>

## Monasticism in Tibet

Political systems have ideologies that summarize and rationalize their basic premises. In Tibet, the modern state headed by the Dalai Lama and his *Gelug* (“yellow hat”) sect was founded in 1642 after decades of bitter sectarian conflict with a rival (*Kargyu*) sect. The new polity was based on a value system in which religious goals and activities were paramount. Not only was the ruler, the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (and after him succeeding Dalai Lamas), considered an actual incarnation of the Bodhisattva Avaloketisvara, but monks served alongside laymen as officials and jointly administered the country. In addition, beginning in the 18th century, regents who ruled during the Dalai Lamas’ minority also came to be chosen from the ranks of the incarnate lamas. Because of this, Tibetans conceived of their polity as one in which “religion and politics/government were joined together.”<sup>4</sup>

A prime goal of the Dalai Lama’s new theocratic government was to support and enhance Buddhism, particularly of its own Yellow Hat sect. Fostering Buddhism was seen as a key measure of Tibet’s worth, and as late as 1946, the Tibetan government conveyed this poignantly in a diplomatic letter it sent to the Chinese government: “There are many great nations on this earth who have achieved unprecedented wealth and might, but there is only one nation which is dedicated to the well-being of humanity in

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<sup>2</sup> Goldstein and Kapstein, 1998, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Tibetan monasticism still exists in Tibet although in an attenuated form due to government limitations on the numbers of monks. For a broad discussion of Buddhism in contemporary Tibet see Goldstein, 1998a and b.

<sup>4</sup> In Tibetan, *chos srid gnyis ldan* or *chos srid gnyis 'brel*.

the world [through its practice of monk conducted Buddhist prayer rituals] and that is the religious land of Tibet which cherishes a joint spiritual and temporal system.”<sup>5</sup>

This religiosity was measured by the number of celibate monks and monasteries, that is to say, by the numbers of males who had renounced having wives and families to join monastic communities and thereby take the first step on a long journey toward spiritual development and enlightenment. There was, therefore, a strong value given to creating as many monks as possible.<sup>6</sup> Every male who became a monk was a victory for Buddhism and a reaffirmation of Tibet’s commitment to exalt religiosity. Tibetans, not surprisingly, not only believed that celibate monkhood per se was superior to secular status, but that all monks, even those we might classify as “marginal” or “bad” monks, were superior to their lay counterparts. Several Tibetan sayings expressed by monks reflect this, for example, one monk said: *'jig rten rab la chos ba'i mtha' skyes* (“the worst in the religious life is better than the best in secular life”). And another said: *gang zhig gser gyi ri la bsnye 'gyur na/ de yi 'dabs chags thams cad gser la 'gyur*. (“whatever comes to lean against a golden mountain will become gold”), meaning that the intrinsic value of monasticism was so great (“gold”) that just the fact of being in a monastery would greatly enhance the male.

The theocratic state in Tibet, consequently, existed not simply to administer its territories for the material welfare of its people or to develop Tibet’s wealth and power vis-à-vis its neighbors, but rather primarily to encourage and facilitate large numbers of males to renounce marriage, family and secular life and accept monastic vows for the salvation of the individual and the glory of Tibetan religiosity. The monastery stood physically and metaphorically as a wall keeping out the immediacy of kinship that imbues secular life in village communities and replacing it with an alternative culture where the immediacy of religious rites and practices dominated social life. Traditional Tibet, in essence, measured its success—its pre-modern GDP if you will—spiritually in terms of the number of monks, monasteries and prayer rituals it produced, not materially in terms of the amount of wool, skins and other products it produced and exported. For the Tibetan religious elite, Tibet’s unique contribution to humanity and the world was its maintenance of an enormous system of monasteries and monks—“mass monasticism.” Monasticism in Tibet, therefore, was not the otherworldly domain of a minute self-selected elite, but a mass phenomenon. Size rather than quality was the ultimate measure of the success of monasticism.

### **The demography of monasticism**

There are no real data on how many monks and monasteries existed in Tibet when the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama came to power four hundred years ago in 1642, although his chief minister, Desi Sangye Gyatso, wrote in his history of the Yellow Hat sect (Vaidurya

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<sup>5</sup> Goldstein 1989, p. 816.

<sup>6</sup> There were, of course, also nuns and nunneries in Tibet, but these were fewer in number and not considered as important.

Serpo (Yellow Beryl)) that there were 1,807 monasteries and 97,538 monks (of all sects) in 1694 (including Kham but not Amdo).<sup>7</sup> For later periods, the Tibetan exile government has estimated that there were 2,700 monasteries and 115,000 monks in 1951 or about 10-15% of the population and 20-30% of all males.<sup>8</sup> This figure must have included many temples (*lhakhang*) where one or two monks presided as overseers since the average number of monks per monastery otherwise would be only 40 and that is far too few. Chinese government reports also state that surveys conducted in the 1950s revealed more than 2,700 monasteries *and temples* and 120,000 monks, or about 24% of the male population.<sup>9</sup> Although these are obviously just crude guesstimates, they show interesting similarities and generally reveal the extent of mass monasticism in traditional Tibet. By contrast, in Thailand, another prominent Buddhist society, only about 1-2 percent of the total number of males were monks and most of these were not life-long permanent monks.<sup>10</sup>

Another way to assess the magnitude of Tibetan monasticism is by looking at its great monastic centers. It is clear that Tibet was the home to the largest monasteries in the world in the modern era and of the many Tibetan monasteries in the 1950s, a number, perhaps as many as 15, were large establishments with over one thousand monks. It is these that Tibetans saw as exemplifying and providing proof of the greatness of the Tibetan monastic system. In and around Tibet's capital Lhasa, for example, there were three huge Yellow Hat monastic seats—Drepung, Sera, Ganden—that together housed about 20,000 monks. Drepung alone had about 10,000 monks. By contrast, Lhasa, the capital and largest city, had only about 30,000 inhabitants. Major monastic centers also existed in other parts of political Tibet such as Tashilhunpo monastery in Shigatse as well as outside of political Tibet in Qinghai (Kumbum monastery), Gansu (Labrang monastery) and in Kham (Litang, Derge, Batang). Other Tibetan Buddhist sects such as Sakya and Karmapa also had large monasteries, although the focus in this paper is on the dominant Yellow Hat sect.

To create a Buddhist society with a large monastic segment, however, meant there had to be thousands upon thousands of men willing to cut attachments to lay society and family life and adopt lives in an alternative culture—a community of celibate monks each of whom in their eyes stood on his own like a single stick of incense. To facilitate this, Tibet developed effective mechanisms for recruiting large numbers of monks, socializing them into an alternative culture, and retaining them in lives of celibacy.

## **Monastic recruitment and organization**

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<sup>7</sup> Dunggar 1991, p. 75. Data from a Qing dynasty survey reported in 1733 that there were 3,477 monasteries and 356,230 monks (Dunggar 1991, p. 76) but this seems too high.

<sup>8</sup> Goldstein 1998, p. 15. <http://www.tibet.org/Activism/Rights/religion.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Information Office of the State Council. "Tibet's march toward modernization." White Paper China Daily, 8 November 2001. At present there are limitations on the number of monasteries and monks in China but the Chinese government still reports that there are 1,700 monasteries, temples and other sites of religious activity, with over 46,000 Buddhist monks. (white paper <http://english.people.com.cn/features/tibetpaper/tibet.html>).

<sup>10</sup> Tambiah 1976: 266-67.

In Tibet, monks were almost always recruited as very young children through the agency of their parents or guardians. It was considered important to recruit monks before they had experienced sexual relations with girls, so monks were brought to the monastery as young boys, usually between the ages of 6-12. On the other hand, it was *not* considered important what these boys themselves felt about a lifetime commitment to celibate monasticism and they were basically made monks without regard to their personality, temperament or inclination.

Parents sometimes broached the subject with a son but usually simply told him of their decision. Monastic rules officially required that monks enter of their own volition and the monastery formally asked each entrant whether they wanted to be a monk but this was actually just a token inquiry. For example, if a young monk found the transition to monastic life unpleasant and tried to run away, the monastery did not take this as evidence that the boy did not want to be a monk and therefore let him leave. To the contrary, it invariably sent older monks to search for and forcibly return the runaway child monks. Parents agreed with this view so even if a runaway child monk managed to reach his home, he typically received not sympathy and support but a scolding and the immediate return to the monastery. Interestingly, the process of monastic socialization ultimately worked and all of the many monks who related incidents of running away, in retrospect, did not see this as abusive. Rather, they laughed at how stupid they had been to want to give up being a monk when young. Tibetans traditionally felt that young boys could not comprehend the privilege of being a monk and it was up to their elders to see to it that they had the right opportunities.<sup>11</sup> All of this, of course, greatly facilitated the operationalization of mass monasticism.

This system of recruitment through child monks occurred not only in the three great Yellow Hat monastic seats around Lhasa, but also in the thousands of smaller monasteries scattered throughout Tibet proper and the ethnic Tibetan areas of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan.

Recruiting young boys as lifelong monks made sense from the viewpoint of the mass monastic ideology, but posed practical problems in terms of daily life. Tibetan monasteries were not run as communes with monk canteens providing food for all monks. Neither did monks make daily begging trips to secure food. Rather, individual monks were responsible for securing their own foodstuffs and cooking their own meals.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, young child monks needed an adult to take care of them, at least until they reached their late teens when they would be able to live independently. The mechanism used to achieve this was to incorporate young monks into what we can think of as monk households (*shagtshang*), that is to say, young monks moved in with an older monk. These monk households operated much like lay village households in that they had an

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<sup>11</sup> Another category of monks came to the Three Great Monastic Seats in Lhasa as young adults after spending their childhood monk years studying the basics in distant monasteries. They were called tharingga (“ones from far away”) and were organized slightly differently from the normal monks who entered directly as children since they were self-sufficient and were expected to return to their home monasteries after completing their advanced studies.

<sup>12</sup> Monks received a salary from the monastery several times a year but this was typically not enough to subsist.

internal authority hierarchy and combined co-residence and economic cooperation. The older monk who was the head of the monk household was responsible for the economics of the household and for raising the boy—for providing housing, food, discipline, etc. In turn the junior monk was obligated to turn over any income he received from alms or monastery salary to the household head, just as members of lay families turned over any income they earned to their household. And, like lay households, the junior monk worked at whatever the monk household head instructed, e.g., sweeping, fetching water, etc. Lay and monk households, therefore were structurally and functionally similar, the obvious key difference being that monk households were comprised of only males and reproduced themselves not via marriage, sex and reproduction, but by conscious selection of the household head.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, Tibetan parents seeking to make a son a monk had to search among friends and relatives to find an older monk who was willing to take in their son and assume responsibility for the boy's livelihood. In some cases, the older monk would be related to the boy and would likely have met him previously, but in other cases, e.g., if the boy was the child of a friend of a friend, they would have had no prior contact or connection. Thus, although the members of monastic households were sometimes related through kinship, this was not at all necessary.

Moreover, the relationship between the senior and junior monks in a household was not couched in terms of lay kinship terminology nor was kinship terminology used in the monastery between monks.<sup>14</sup> Rather, monks in households used the core monastic idiom of “teacher-disciple” in a fictive manner. For example, the younger monk(s) in a monk household all referred to the senior monk as their “teacher” (*gegen* or *gen*) and the senior monk would in turn say that he had one or two “disciples” (*gidru*). However, no one in the monastery mistook the “guardian” *gegen* heading the household for real “teachers” and the official term of reference for them was actually *dopderra gegen* (*lto ster ba'i dge rgan*) which translates as “the *gegen* who gives food.” In contrast, the real teachers were known as *beja gegen* (*dpe cha dge rgan*) or “a *gegen* who teaches religious texts.” Sometimes a single older monk in a monk household played both roles, but usually they were separate.

The duration of monk households varied but usually they lasted until the senior monk died. If there were only two people in the household, normally the younger monk inherited the property and apartment, but if there were more than one, the late household head would have selected one to become the new household head. Often the household by that time would have taken in another young monk so in these cases the household had continuity across generations. Generally, therefore, these monk households stayed

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<sup>13</sup> Actually, homosexual relations between the older monks and their young wards was not unknown in the great monastic seats and there were also some long-term “sexual” relationships among older monks living in households, but that issue goes beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say here that Tibetan monks considered homosexual sexual relations a breach of the vow of celibacy only if it involved penetration of an orifice such as the anus. Homosexual intercourse, therefore, was normally done between the thighs, and while not completely acceptable, was widely tolerated in the large monastic seats.

<sup>14</sup> See Herrou, 2005 for an case where pseudo-kinship was utilized in a Taoist monastery in contemporary China.

together for many decades with mutual sentiments of attachment and affection developing. Ironically, therefore, while the institution of monk households served to allow child monks to sever their attachments to lay society at a young age and be readily incorporated into monastic communities, at the same time it created, to a degree at least, a system that fostered lasting attachments and dependence.

At the same time, the ties of real kinship were not totally severed when boys became monks. Not only, as mentioned above, were some boys placed in monk households with an older relative, but monks maintained loose ties with their families. At some stages of the life cycle of a monk, the families of monks might help to support the monk by sending food to the monk household, whereas at other stages, a successful monk might assist his relatives family, as the following example illustrates.

In this example, an adult monk who had just risen in the monastic hierarchy used his new position to help a poor relative by taking two of her sons into Drepung monastery so as to eliminate two mouths for her to feed. He explained how this occurred:

Just after I became the steward (*nangnyer*) for the Loseling *Chiso* [the head manger of the entire monastery]. I heard that my maternal aunt who was [a nomad] living in Damshung had become very poor. So when they asked me to visit them, I took a 15 day home-leave and went. They ... wanted to show the others in the community that their nephew was now a powerful official. ...

When I arrived, I found that they were extremely poor. They had no sheep or goats of their own and only a few head of livestock on lease. They were so very poor. The father sewed fleece-lined dresses (*bagtsa*) and the mother dug up *droma* (wild sweet potatoes) and sold them. They had more children than animals.... I made one of the young boys a new fleece-lined dress and then took him to Lhasa as part of my monk household [in the monastery]. This boy was very clever so I thought it was better not to make him a monk at once. Instead, I sent him to a private school in Lhasa where he would learn to read and write [the cursive script]. Later he could be made a monk and could become a high official in the monastery [from his household] because he would know how to write the cursive script well.<sup>15</sup> The next year I told my aunt to send me another of her sons. He wasn't as clever as the first son so I directly made him a monk in Drepung. I found a poor monk who was living alone and told the poor monk, "Please keep this boy as your disciple. I am the servant of someone [the *Chiso*] and can't help much at home now, but every year I will give you 2.5 *khe*<sup>16</sup> of flour and 2.5 *khe* of barley to help with his subsistence. Later [as you get older], this boy will be a help to you. The poor monk said okay

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<sup>15</sup> Drepung did not teach its monks the calligraphic cursive writing script that was used by Tibetan government officials and higher monastic officials who dealt with managing monastic resources, so monks who wanted such positions had to learn it on their own.

<sup>16</sup> A *khe* (*khal*) is a traditional volume unit that was equal to about 31 pounds of barley.

and took him." He agreed to be the *gegen* [so this boy became part of a household with an unrelated *dopderra gegen*].<sup>17</sup>

A separate category of monk households were the great households (*labrang*) of incarnate lamas. Unlike the households of ordinary monks, these always continued across generations with leadership being passed on by reincarnation succession. In other words, when the incarnate lama who was the head of the *labrang* died, that lama was believed to reincarnate into an infant who, when discovered a few years later, became the new head/owner of the *labrang*. Although actual control rested with monk stewards and managers during the new incarnation's minority, when he became an adult he assumed control.

### Parental motives

There were many reasons why parents made a son a monk. As was indicated earlier, making one's son a monk was culturally valued, even if the boy never became a great religious thinker or practitioner. Just his presence in a monastery would benefit him in this and future lives. It was, therefore, a way of giving a son a prestigious status which required little of the hard manual labor that permeated village life while also, as mentioned earlier, exempting the boy from all corvée obligations to his lord. At the same time it created positive "merit" for the parents. One nomad monk related that in his region making a son a monk was considered equivalent to building a stupa in terms of merit gained.<sup>18</sup>

A second motivation for enrolling one's son derived from the divination of lamas or monks. Parents frequently sought divination when their children were ill. Sometimes the remedy prescribed by the practitioner involved propitiating some god who was causing the illness but on other occasions, the prescription called for the parents to promise to later dedicate this boy to religion—to a monastic life. Similarly, in times of sickness, parents sometimes prayed on their own to their protective deity and promised that if he spared their son they would later make him a monk.

A third type of situation occurred when a young boy showed a liking for monks. This type of boy might hang around a monk uncle when he was visiting the family and might cry when his monk relative left asking to go with him. If the uncle encouraged this and urged the family to make the boy his disciple-ward in his monastic household, the family often would agree. In some cases, there were family traditions of uncles and nephews joining a monastery (and monk household) generation after generation.

A fourth, and extremely common, type of situation occurred when parents made a son a monk as part of a strategy for organizing their family's human resources so as to minimize the likelihood of family fragmentation and land division in the next generation. The basic family in rural Tibet was (and still is) is an extended stem family formed through the mechanism of fraternal polyandry (2 or more brothers jointly taking a bride) or monogamy.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview, 1991, M.0142.01, Drepung, Tibet.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, 1991, M.0030.01, Drepung, Tibet.

Fraternal Polyandry is a functional equivalent of primogeniture in that it seeks to produce only one heir. As there is only one wife per generation and all the brothers are jointly considered the father, all the children of the wife are considered a single heir. In the next generation, the multiple male children will also together marry polyandrously. This type of stem family precludes each of several sons taking his own bride either within the natal family or by setting up new neolocal families.

However, marrying all sons polyandrous is not always possible because of age differences between the brothers. For example, if the eldest of three brothers was 23 and the next brother 17 and the youngest brother only 12 years old (several daughters having been born between the sons), the parents might decide it will be too difficult for the youngest son to become incorporated into the marriage when he matures so will only marry the eldest two sons polyandrously. Because they are seeking to create only one set of heirs per generation, they will not bring a second bride into the household for the youngest son but rather will send him out of the household either by making him a monk or by sending him later as a bridegroom to a family with only daughters. An unintended consequence of this system is an excess of unmarried daughters. Roughly 25% of females age 20-40 do not marry and live separately either as spinsters or single mothers (if they have had affairs and children).<sup>19</sup>

Poverty also was very important in motivating parents to make sons monks. Very poor Tibetans with many children had two main mechanisms for balancing their income with subsistence needs. One was making one or more sons a monk as the above mentioned case of the nomad illustrated. Another was to send young sons and daughters as servants to other households. In such cases, the children lived with the other family and were fed by them. Often there was also a small annual salary in grain that went to the parents.

Finally, another very different type of monastic recruitment derived from the right of some monasteries to conscript boys as a *corvée* tax if the number of their monks fell below a certain limit. This was called *tratre* (*grwa khral*) or "monk tax".

### **Structure and function of a large monastery**

Tibet is a large country with important regional differences and four major Buddhist sects each of which had its own monasteries. In addition there is a non-Buddhist sect known as Bon which also had a monastic tradition. Within these traditions there were major large monastic seats as well as many small monasteries located in remote areas. Some of these were completely independent but others were branch monasteries of larger monastic seats such as Drepung, Sera and Ganden. Consequently, it is difficult to generalize about "all" monasteries, although regardless of size and fame, Tibetan monasteries recruited monks as children. However, for the purpose of further illustrating Tibetan "mass monasticism," the mega-monastery Drepung with its 10,000 monks will be used as an example.

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<sup>19</sup> For discussions on Tibetan polyandry and the family see Goldstein 1971, 1976, 1978, and 1987.



Large monasteries like Drepung were complex institutions that were internally structured like segmentary lineages being divided internally into semi-autonomous sub-monastic units called *tratsang* of which there were four in Drepung: Gomang, Loseling, Deyang and Ngagpa. *Tratsang* are normally called “colleges” in the literature due to certain similarities with English universities like Oxford which also were made up of a number of semi-autonomous units. Just as students enrolled in one of Oxford’s colleges, young boys enrolled in one of Drepung’s colleges, although the use of the term college is misleading since *tratsang* were not schools per se, but rather communities of celibate males who remained there their entire lives.

Drepung monastery as a whole had little control over its four constituent colleges each of which had their own estates, serfs, capital funds, endowments, officials, teaching curriculum, monks and an abbot. On the other hand, the monastery as a whole also had its own estates, capital funds and administrative officials and was headed by a committee of current and ex-abbots (from the various colleges).

Each monastic college, in turn, was internally sub-divided into a number of named semi-autonomous residence units called *khamtsen* which also had their own resources and officials. Gomang College, for example, had 16 *khamtsen* in 1959, one of which, Hamdong, alone had about 2,000 monks. New monks were affiliated to *khamtsen* units based on their natal region so that monks coming from distant areas with non-standard dialects would be housed together with others from their same region.<sup>20</sup> Individual monks, therefore, belonged to a *khamtsen*, which was part of a college, which was part of the overall monastery. Individuals, therefore, had cross-cutting allegiances. Two monks could have the same overall institutional allegiance (Drepung) but different college allegiances, or the same college affiliation but different *khamtsen* affiliation. Nevertheless, despite this similarity to a segmentary kinship system, no kinship ideology was used, just as none was used in universities like Oxford.

At the level of the individual, Drepung’s ten thousand monks were divided into two broad categories—those who studied a formal curriculum of Buddhist theology and philosophy and those who did not. The former, known as *pechawa*, were a small minority, amounting to only about 10 percent of the total monk population. These “scholar monks,” pursued a long curriculum that took approximately fifteen years to complete.<sup>21</sup> The curriculum in each college used a slightly different set of texts, although in the end they all covered the same material. The scholar monks in Gomang, Loseling, and Deyang met three times a day to practice debating in their respective college’s outdoor walled park called a *chöra*, or dharma grove. Monks came to Drepung from all over the Tibetan Buddhist world (including Mongolia) to see if they could master the difficult curriculum and obtain the advanced degree of *geshe*. The intellectual greatness of the Yellow Hat sect’s monastic tradition was measured by the brilliance of these scholar monks.

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<sup>20</sup> Monks coming from distant regions were older and had already entered the monastic order in their home area so were treated very differently with respect to guardian teachers and monk households.

<sup>21</sup> Anon. 1986.

The overwhelming majority of monks, the so called “common” monks (*tramang* or *tragyü*), however, did not pursue this arduous curriculum and were not involved in formal study. Many could not read much more than one or two prayer books, and some, in fact, were functionally illiterate, having memorized only a few basic prayers. These monks had some intermittent monastic work obligations in their early years (as a kind of “new monk tax”), but otherwise were free to do what they liked within the overall framework of monastic (vinaya) rules).

Despite the monastic segment’s commitment to the ideology of mass monasticism, Tibetan monks had to support themselves. In general, their income came from a combination of sources: 1) salary from their monastery/college/*khamtsen* (which in itself was normally not sufficient to subsist), 2) alms given to individual monks at the time of the prayer assemblies, 3) income from their own labor, and 4. support in food from their natal family. Many monks in Tibet actually spent a considerable amount of time engaged in income-producing activities including crafts like tailoring and medicine, working as servants for other monks, engaging in trade, or even leaving the monastery at peak agricultural times to work for farmers.

This is surprising since mega-monasteries like Drepung were owners of huge estates and serfs. According to 1959 Chinese statistics, 36.8 percent of the total amount of cultivated land in Tibet was held by monasteries and lamas (and another 24% by aristocratic families, and 38.9% by the government itself). Drepung Monastery itself is said to have owned 185 manorial estates, 20,000 serfs, 300 pasture areas and 16,000 nomads each of which had a population of hereditarily bound peasant families who worked the monastery’s (or college’s) land without wages as a corvée obligation.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, since there were no banks in Tibet, monasteries like Drepung had huge capital funds which lent out money and grain at high interest. Scores of monks went out yearly to rural Tibet to collect payment of interest and principal at harvest time. The income from these resources and activities could have supported the subsistence of the monks fully had it been allocated predominately for that purpose, but it was not.

Drepung (and its constituent colleges, etc.) instead allocated a substantial portion of their income to support rituals and prayer chanting assemblies. Such prayer ceremonies were formal meetings in huge assembly halls that involved all of the monks belonging to the sponsoring unit (the monastery as a whole, the college or the *khamtsen*). Thousands of monks sitting in long rows intoning prayers together for the benefit of humanity is an image Tibetans cherished and was considered as one of the most important functions of the monastery. However, these prayer sessions were also expensive since each of the monks attending was served butter-tea during breaks in the chanting. Consequently, sponsoring the prayer assemblies meant providing tea for many thousands of monks daily which required the monastery to use large amounts of butter, tea and firewood. This was one of the monastery’s biggest expenses.

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<sup>22</sup> White paper (<http://english.people.com.cn/features/tibetpaper/tibet.html>), page 1. Epstein 1991 cites 151 estates and 540 pasture areas.

Mega-monasteries like Drepung, of course, could have restricted the number of monks they accepted in order to both fund all its monks adequately and still do the prayer ceremonies. In fact, the Tibetan government at one point had tried to place limits on the number of monks (e.g., Drepung's limit was set at 7,700), but the monasteries ignored this and allowed all who came to join. In the ideology of mass monasticism, having large numbers of monks took precedence, so how monks financed what they needed in addition to their monastic salary was, by and large, seen as the monks own problem.

The monks most affected by the insufficient funding were those who had made a commitment to study Buddhist theology full-time, that is, the scholar monks. They received no special funds from the monastery and had no time to engage in trade or other income-producing activities because of their heavy study burdens. Consequently, they typically lived solely on their monastery salary and alms and were forced to lead extremely frugal lives unless they were able to find wealthy patrons to supplement their income or were themselves wealthy, as in the case of the incarnate lamas. Tales abound in Drepung of famous scholar monks so poor that they had to eat the staple food—*tsamba* (parched barley flour)—with water rather than tea, or worse, who had to eat the leftover dough from ritual offerings (*torma*).

Consequently, in the traditional era, the great monasteries like Drepung, Sera and Ganden were full of very different sorts of monks, some rich, some poor, some devoted to study, some involved in administration and others doing a wide range of labor and trading, and some doing very little and just barely subsisting.

### **Leaving the monastery**

Enrolling young monks without regard to their wishes or personalities meant inevitable problems of adjustment. Monks had the right to leave the monastic order, and as they became young adults in their twenties, had the ability to do so. Consequently, powerful mechanisms were needed to retain most of the young adult monks who were unsure about living a lifetime of celibacy. The monastic system was structured to facilitate this. On the one hand, while monks enjoyed high status, ex-monks were somewhat looked down on. On the other hand, the great large monasteries generally did not place severe restrictions on comportment or demand educational achievement. Rather than diligently weeding out all novices who seemed unsuited for a rigorous life of prayer, study, and meditation, the Tibetan monastic system expelled monks only if they committed murder or engaged in heterosexual intercourse. There were also no exams that novices or monks were required to pass in order to remain in the monastery (although there were required exams for higher intellectual statuses within the monastic ranks). Monks who had no interest in studying or meditating were as welcome as the virtuoso scholar monks. Even totally illiterate monks were accommodated because, in the ideology of mass monasticism, they too had made the critical break from the attachments of secular life. The monks of Drepung conveyed the great diversity of types of monks in their monastery with the pithy saying: “In the ocean there are fishes and frogs.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Goldstein and Tsarong (1985) for a discussion of how the values of monks change as they get older.

Furthermore, leaving the monastery posed economic problems. Monks lost whatever rights they might otherwise have had to their family's farm when they entered the monastery, so monks who left the monastery had to find some new source of income. They also reverted to their original serf status when they left so were liable for *corvée* service to their lord. By contrast, if they remained monks, their basic economic needs were met without having to work too hard. All these factors made it both easier and more advantageous for monks to remain in the monastery.

As mentioned above, the monastic leadership espoused the belief that since the Tibetan state was first and foremost the supporter and patron of religion, the needs and interests of religion should take primacy. And since mass monasticism represented the greatness of Tibetan religion, they believed that the political and economic system existed to facilitate this and that *they*, not the government, could best judge what was in the short- and long-term interests of religion. Thus, it was their religious duty and right to intervene whenever they felt the government was acting against the interests of religion. This, of course, brought them into the mainstream of political affairs and into potential conflict with the Dalai Lama/regent and the government. And while the Dalai Lama and the rest of the government agreed with mass monasticism in principle, there was often disagreement on specific issues. For example, in 1946 when the government hired an English teacher and opened a modern school in Lhasa to better prepare Tibet to deal with the modern world, the monks in Lhasa perceived this as a threat to the dominance of religion and protested, threatening the students with bodily harm. The government quickly backed down and the school was disbanded after a few weeks.<sup>24</sup>

The domination of the mass-monastic ideology in traditional Tibet is illustrated vividly by a serious dispute that occurred in Drepung in 1958, the year before the uprising in Lhasa that ended the traditional system.

### **The Gomang dispute**

As indicated earlier, Drepung monks did not have to pass examinations to remain part of the monastic community, and only about 10 percent of the monks were actively engaged in the Buddhist study curriculum leading to the *geshe* degree. This became a problem for Drepung's Gomang College when the number of monks annually receiving the *geshe* degree became so low that it embarrassed the abbot of the college. The Gomang College prayer chant master (*umdze*) of the time explained,

During the six-year term of each abbot, it was expected that 60 *geshes* would be produced. But in recent years in Gomang College, only two, three, or four were graduating each year. Because of this, the government asked Drepung why there were so few *geshes* now whereas in the past there had been so many. When we looked into this, we found...that the number of *geshes* produced was declining because in general only 100 to 200 of Gomang College's over 4,000 monks were engaged in active study. So we decided that we had to do something to reverse this trend.<sup>25</sup>

Part of the reason for this dearth was Drepung's policy of not providing special

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<sup>24</sup> See Goldstein 1989.

<sup>25</sup> Goldstein 1998b, p. 34.

financial support for monks engaged in full-time theological studies. As explained earlier, these monks had no time to engage in income-producing work like ordinary monks and faced lives of hardship and poverty unless they had some other source of support.

Nevertheless, there was very little support in the monastery for providing extra income to scholar monks or, alternatively, for forcing all monks to study and pass exams. Most of the monks, particularly the common monks and monk administrators, in fact, felt that the scholar monks were studying for their own benefit, not for the welfare of the monastery, so deserved nothing special. They were not considered better than the “common monks.” Consequently, the Gomang College reformers decided that the best way to proceed was indirectly. They convinced the abbot to make a new rule shifting the site of the monastic salary payments to the dharma grove where the scholar monks debated. The logic behind this move was explained by one of the leaders of the reform faction: “We thought that if we distributed salaries in the dharma grove, more monks would come to it, and if we did this continually, then some of these monks would get used to the dharma grove [and come even when there was no salary distribution and get interested in studying].”

The abbot’s new order meant that all monks, even monk-administrators, had to go to the dharma grove and sit through the prayers that preceded the debating session before collecting their salaries. Although they did not have to study, or participate in the debates, or even attend the dharma grove during the rest of the year, this order produced an outcry of protest from the monk officials who handled the college’s administrative work. At their instigation, the mass of common monks became involved, insisting that the rules of the monastery were sacred and could not be changed.

This controversy polarized Gomang College’s monks and eventually led to violence when a mob of angry monks broke into a meeting on this issue and dragged three of the reform leaders outside where they tied them to pillars, beat them, and then locked them up as prisoners. Ultimately, the Dalai Lama’s government intervened and freed the monks, but while it expelled the leaders of both the pro and anti reform factions, it did not force the monks to go to the dharma grove to collect their salaries. The reform program, therefore, had failed because the fundamental premise of the mass monastic ideology gave equivalence to all monks regardless of their knowledge or spirituality.

In conclusion, therefore, the Tibetan monastic system was a distinctive form of Buddhist monasticism that gave priority to recruiting large numbers of young boys into an alternative monastic culture and society that included a commitment to a lifetime of celibacy. It was an orientation that I have called mass monasticism because its priority was to provide an opportunity for very large numbers of males to become monks, even though many of these would never study religion deeply or engage in serious meditation. As mentioned earlier, about 90% of the monks in the great monastic centers like Drepung were not “scholar monks” actively studying Buddhism philosophy to attain the advanced degree of *geshe*. However, in the dominant emic perspective, all monks were viewed as having equally made the critical first step in religious progress by cutting their attachments to wife, children, and secular life and becoming part of monastic

communities. Monasticism in Tibet, therefore, was not focused on creating a few great scholar monks, but rather on creating the conditions wherein large numbers of boys could have an opportunity to become monks for their entire lives. Some would study and debate at the highest intellectual levels, others would only participate in prayer assemblies where they chanted memorized texts and some would not even do that. But they were all seen as having successfully made the difficult commitment to follow the Buddha's teaching and leave the secular world behind them.

Until its demise in 1959, this system of mass monasticism was extremely successful, creating and sustaining the largest monasteries in the modern world and the largest proportion of full-time celibate monks.

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